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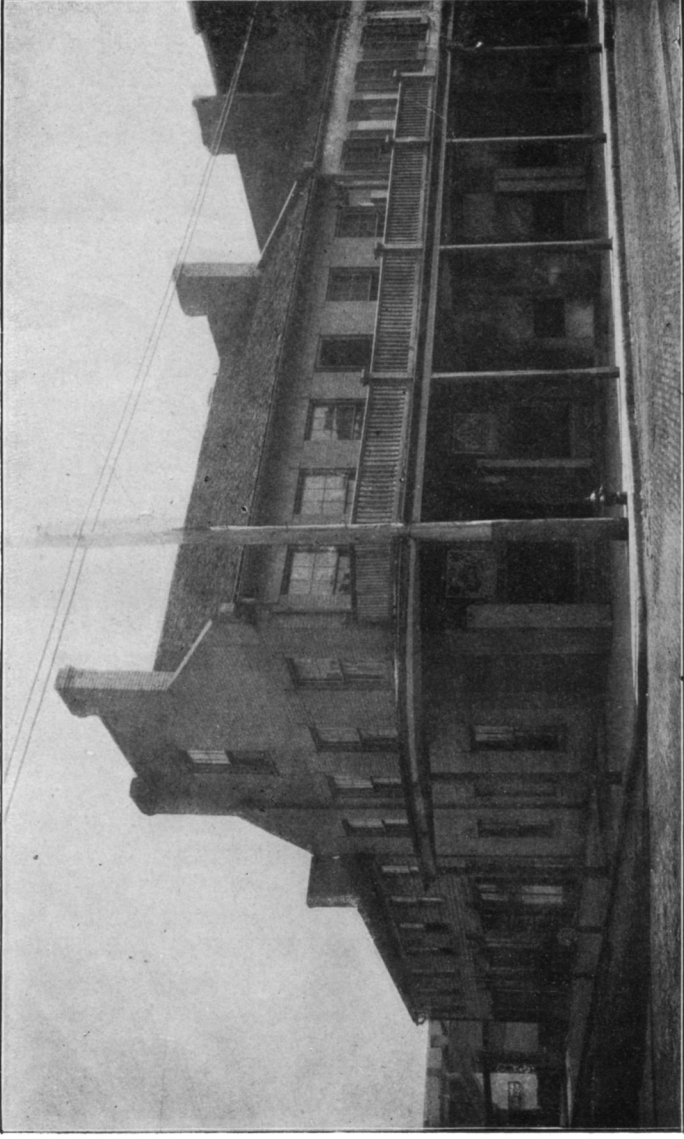
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“Mansion House,” Belleville, where Dickens was entertained in 1842.
The porch in front of the house is of modern construction.

CHARLES DICKENS IN ILLINOIS.

(Dr. J. F. Snyder.)

A highly prized volume in my library is an old, stained copy of the first American edition of the Pickwick Papers, (published by Carey, Lea & Blanchard, Philadelphia, 1838), which my father gave me in 1841. Reading and re-reading that book with boyish delight during the school vacation of that summer interested me in its author, known then as "Boz," a *nom de plume* he had adopted early in his literary career. He was already famous out here, so that when the eastern papers announced his contemplated visit to the United States the next year, I shared with our people generally the hope and expectancy that he would extend his tour as far west as the Mississippi, which he subsequently did. No railroad had then penetrated the wilderness as far as St. Louis, at that time the frontier city of the vast west, and steamboats and stage coaches were about the only means for public transportation west of the Allegheny mountains. Mr. Dickens, accompanied by his wife, came by the old emigrant route, in steamboats, down the Ohio river from Pittsburg, and up the Mississippi, arriving at St. Louis on the 11th of April, 1842.

The steamboat Fulton, upon which Mr. and Mrs. Dickens had taken passage at Louisville, Ky., arrived at St. Louis in the evening (of the 11th), but as it was not expected until the next day, no reception committee appeared to meet the distinguished tourists, and they made their way, in a hack, to the Planters House, then by far

the finest hotel west of the Mississippi, where they were regally entertained. When their arrival became known, the citizens of St. Louis spared neither pains nor expense in pressing upon them every social attention and the most cordial hospitality during their stay.

Mr. Dickens having expressed—as he says in his *American Notes*—“a great desire to see a prairie before turning back from the furthest point of my wanderings; and as some gentlemen of the town had, in their hospitable consideration, an equal desire to gratify me, a day was fixed before my departure, for an expedition to the Looking Glass Prairie, which is within thirty miles of the town.” Friday, April 15, was the day selected for the excursion, and the 13th chapter of his *Notes* is devoted to the description of that “Jaunt to the Looking Glass Prairie and Back.”

Beside Mr. Dickens and the drivers of the four teams, there were nine men—and no ladies—in the party, only two of whom I could identify and can now remember. These were John J. Anderson, a banker, and George Knapp, of the *Missouri Republican*. They were all young men connected with the newspapers and business interests of St. Louis, bent upon affording their famous guest a glimpse of the grandeur of Illinois, the “two large baskets and two large demi-johns,” with ice and other extras, taken along, indicating the picnic aspect of the “jaunt,” and intent to make it as pleasant for him as possible. Seated in the several conveyances with one of their number on horseback as guide, they crossed the Mississippi in the early morning on one of the Wiggins Company ferry boats. At that season of the year the miry road across the seven miles of soft loamy soil of the American Bottom, and the succeeding seven miles of sticky clay uplands to Belleville, usually rendered traveling over it slow and difficult, and was, in fact, at times almost impassable.

To make matters worse, a heavy rain had fallen the night before, filling the chuck-holes in the road full of water, and further diluting the already deep mud. "We had a pair of very strong horses," says Mr. Dickens in his *Notes*, "but traveled at the rate of little more than a couple of miles an hour, through one unbroken slough of black mud and water. It had no variety but in depth. Now it was only half over the wheels, now it hid the axle-tree, and now the coach sank down in it almost to the windows." This description of traveling over that part of the great National Road at that day is not greatly overdrawn. But Mr. Dickens failed to notice the topography of that region further on, or forgot it in the two years transpiring between his visit and the publication of his *American Notes*, as, after leaving the French Village at the foot of the bluffs where the road ascends to an elevation of a hundred feet, he says: "We went forward again, through mud and mire, and damp and festering heat, and brake and bush, attended always by the music of the frogs and pigs, until nearly noon, when we halted at a place called Belleville, * * * a small collection of wooden houses, huddled together in the very heart of the bush and swamp." His memory of the continuation of *mud* all the way was certainly correct, but Belleville, situated on high rolling ground far removed from sloughs and swamps, was even then a flourishing, pretentious town containing quite a number of business houses and handsome residences substantially built of brick and stone. There was then no telegraph to apprise the Belleville people of the great novelist's coming, or of his arrival at St. Louis, and but few of them knew that he had honored our town by his presence until the next issue of the weekly paper. Two years later, 1844, the first telegraph line to reach St. Louis was constructed by the O'Reiley Company alongside of the old stage road from Vincennes, with the wire fastened by insulators to the trees where it passed through the timber, and crossed the Mississippi from the top of a tall mast at Illinois-

town (now East St. Louis) to a similar one on Bloody Island, and from there to the top of the shot tower near the Belcher sugar refinery on the other side.

Returning home, at about eleven o'clock in the forenoon of that 15th day of April, from an errand upon which I had been sent to the eastern part of the village, I had reached the public square when the line of carriages came pulling through the mud up Main street from the west. In doubt as to whether they formed a funeral procession, or transported some kind of show, I stopped to see them pass by. Just then Philip B. Fouke, editor of the *Belleville Advocate*, and in later years our Congressman, came down the street to the court house, and I asked him who those traveling strangers were. He had, a few minutes before, interviewed the horseman who had arrived in advance of them to have luncheon prepared for the party, and was hurrying into the court house—circuit court being in session—to inform the bench and bar the object and purpose of the novel expedition that had excited my curiosity. Startled by hearing that Boz, the author of the *Pickwick Papers*, was actually there, I turned about and, keeping abreast of the front carriage, followed it up the street until it stopped at the door of the Mansion House. On the way I was joined by several other boys, my daily associates, not one of whom perhaps had ever heard of Charles Dickens, but attracted by the unusual appearance of so many strange vehicles, went along gazing at them with open-mouthed wonder.

When the barouche conveying Mr. Dickens halted at the curbstone, he was the first of its four inmates to step from it to the sidewalk, and did so with a look of evident relief. It was a perfect day "overhead," warm for the middle of April, with clear sky and the refreshing air of early spring. The landlord, Mr. McBride, came bustling out, bareheaded, to receive the company, and was introduced to the famous writer by one of his traveling com-

panions. The man introduced as "Mr. Dickens" was (to me) a disappointing surprise. In fact, my youthful ideal of the genius who created Mr. Pickwick, Sam Weller and the Widow Bardell, was badly shattered. It is natural for the average man—woman or boy—when hearing much about any noted individual, to form a definite idea of that person's appearance; or, upon reading an interesting book to draw an imaginary portrait of its author. Mr. Dickens was, on that day, a very ordinary looking man indeed, with no external indication of true greatness. In the estimation of "us boys" he compared very unfavorably with Col. Richard M. Johnson, of Kentucky, the slayer of Tecumseh, and late Vice President, who had, a short time before, visited Belleville, and had been given a grand reception with brass band accompaniment.

Mr. Dickens was at that time 30 years of age, of medium size—about 5 feet, 8 or 9 inches tall—square shouldered, erect, and well proportioned in figure, weighing (probably) 140 pounds. His complexion was not of the usual ruddy English cast; his eyes were brown, and dark, slightly curling hair surmounted a broad forehead and smoothly shaved face, then sunburned and mosquito bitten, but none too handsome at best. With the license of conscious superiority he dressed very carelessly, and on this occasion, incased in a common linen coat and coarse straw hat bound around with green ribbon, he attracted some public attention, but certainly ran no risk of being mistaken by strangers for either General Scott or Daniel Webster. He was not very talkative, but when he spoke his voice was soft and pleasant, with clear and distinct pronunciation of every word. He seldom laughed, but his frequent smile was expressive of his keen sense of humor, and appreciation of his novel surroundings. There was about his countenance a cynical expression; but no affectation perceptible in his speech or manners, yet every movement and gesture plainly

indicated that he regarded the homage paid him by our simple people as justly his due, and that any courteous acknowledgement of it on his part would be an unwarranted condescension.

On this part of his American tour the memoranda he jotted down, from day to day, of transpiring events and objects and persons that interested him, must have been brief and disconnected, as his published *Notes* bear internal evidence of having been written out some time after his return to England, with many passages supplied by memory. And his memory of many things he tells of, unaided by his notes made at the time, was often at fault and much confused.

His description of Belleville, as being "in the very heart of the bush and swamp," is an instance of this. Of the Belleville houses he further says, "Many of them had singularly bright doors of red and yellow, for the place had been lately visited by a traveling painter, 'who got along,' as I was told, by 'eating his way.'"

When this was written he drew upon his memory alone, it having retained an indistinct impression of the sloughs and lakes of the American Bottom, and the French Village, through which he passed and of Belleville, all mixed up together. The old French Village, at the foot of the bluffs, it is true, had recently been visited by a tramping painter who left the impress of his art on several gaudily colored doors in that vicinity, but he had not yet "eaten his way" through, or to, our town.

The sarcasm in Mr. Dicken's account of his "Jaunt to the Looking Glass Prairie," though pungent and stinging, is, in the main, amusing, in some instances just, but as often totally devoid of wit or humor, amounting simply to willful malignant, misrepresentation actuated by an animus difficult to comprehend. At the time of his arrival in Belleville, he says, "The criminal court was sitting, and was at that moment trying some criminals for horse stealing. * * * The horses belonging to the

bar, the judge, and witnesses were tied to temporary racks set up roughly in the road, by which it is to be understood a forest path, nearly knee-deep in mud and slime." True the circuit court was then in session, with Sidney Breese on the bench, Wm. H. Underwood, the prosecuting attorney, Wm. C. Kinney, the circuit clerk and Sam. B. Chandler, sheriff. The bar attending that court comprised Lyman Trumbull, Gustavus Koerner, James Shields, Joseph Gillespie, U. F. Linder, N. Niles, Wm. H. Bissell, P. B. Fouke and Governor John Reynolds,

His "forest path" was the public square in the middle of the town, just as it now is, excepting the paving and buildings it then contained. Northeast of its center was the fine old brick court house, and across the street, to the west, the two-story brick offices of the county officials. Fronting that on the south was the new market, also of brick, and on the opposite corner, facing the court house, was the public well. There *were* hitch racks on the east and north of the court house, and—we may as well admit also—some mud in the streets, as usual in the spring months.

The "Mansion House," on the northeast corner of Main and High streets, is still there. Solid and substantial, tho a dingy-looking relic of a past age in the midst of modern progress, it is yet (1910) serviceable as a business house, and, with pride, is pointed out to strangers, by the older residents as the hostelry where Mr. Dickens was entertained in 1842, Of it he says, "There was an hotel in this place, * * * an odd shambling, low-roofed outhouse, half cow shed and half kitchen, with a coarse brown canvas table cloth, and tin sconces stuck against the walls, to hold candles at supper time." The Mansion House was really a large, roomy brick building, fully up to date in all respects, two stories high, with long two-story frame addition, erected only three years before, by Rev. Thomas Harrison, and was well arranged, well furnished and conducted in first-

class style by his daughter and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Wm. J. McBride.

Mr. Dickens and companions on arrival were escorted by the landlord up stairs to rooms provided with water, towels, etc., where they might perform their ablutions and "dress for dinner," and the carriages, from which the horses were unhitched and taken to the stable, were left standing in front of the hotel.

Court having adjourned for the noon recess, Colonel Niles, Governor Koerner, Phil Fouke and two or three other members of the bar, with several citizens, came up to the Mansion House to pay their respects to the famous guest. Judge Breese and Jo. Gillespie declined to accompany them.

With boyish curiosity, and eagerness to see all that was going on, I followed Mr. Dickens—unasked and no doubt unwanted—to the foot of the stairs, and waited there until he came down and was introduced to the lawyers and some of the other visitors. I was in close proximity to his coat tail when he was presented to "Dr. Crocus," and was an interested witness to that interview, which, as narrated in the XIII chapter of the *American Notes*, is substantially correct, with the exception that the landlord, Mr. McBride, was not addressed as "Colonel." He was a quiet, unobtrusive, upright man, an exemplary citizen and rigid Methodist, but not a colonel. The man portrayed as "Dr. Crocus" was an adventurer calling himself Dr. Angus Melrose—perhaps an assumed name—who had, a few months before, alighted in Belleville as a lecturer on phrenology, then a very popular fad, and incidentally offering his professional services for the healing of all known diseases.

To Mr. Dickens' question, "Do you think of soon returning to the old country?" Dr. Melrose answered, "Not yet awhile, sir, not yet. You won't catch me at that just yet, sir. I am a little too fond of freedom for *that*, sir. Ha, ha! It's not so easy for a man to tear himself

from a free country such as this is, sir. Ha, ha! No, no! Ha, ha! None of that till one's obliged to do it, sir. No, no!" In this grandiloquent declaration the Doctor was very evidently—as Mr. Dickens intimated—"playing to the galleries," but he also intended Mr. Dickens to understand that he was speaking ironically and, by innuendo, expressing his contempt for American institutions. With proverbial English obtuseness of perception, however, Mr. Dickens failed to catch the Doctor's covert meaning.

Dr. Melrose was over six feet in height, and robust in proportion, with florid face and long nose. Of friendly, social disposition he was a fluent talker, speaking correct English with broad Scotch accent. To Mr. McBride he stated that he had recently graduated in medicine at the Edinburgh University, and having but limited means, to gratify his desire to see America, he had recourse to the lecture platform, phrenology, and the practice of medicine to defray expenses of touring the country. He remained in Belleville several months, but tho immortalized as "Dr. Crocus" by the *American Notes*, very few persons now living retain the slightest recollection of him.

For half an hour or more Mr. Dickens was surrounded by a throng of citizens, to several of whom he was formally introduced, but to none of whom he addressed anything more than curt, commonplace remarks. It was plain that he was both bored and amused by the curiosity and evident disappointment of the crowd inspecting him, and seemed glad when the dinner bell ended the impromptu reception. The glimpse obtained of him from the open dining room door, when all were seated at the long table, left no doubt as to the ample justice he was doing to the "chicken fixings" specially prepared for him. Dinner over he strolled out on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, viewing the part of town in the range of his vision, while conversing with his St. Louis friends until the horses were brought from the stable and all was ready to move on again.

“From Belleville,” says Mr. Dickens, “we went on through the same desolate kind of waste, and constantly attended, without the interval of a moment, by the same music” (the croaking of bullfrogs). Here again, with the American Bottom vaguely in mind, he drew upon his memory and it failed him. The road from Belleville to Lebanon—then almost the entire twelve miles through dense woods, broken here and there by the farms of Governor Kinney and other old settlers—is over high, undulating and beautiful country, remote from sloughs or swamps or other habitats of the festive mosquito or musical frog.

The hotel at Lebanon was more fortunate than the one in our town in catching the fancy of the great novelist, and he accorded it this dubious praise, “In point of cleanliness and comfort, it would have suffered by no comparison with any English ale house, of a homely kind, in England.” It was a large barn-like frame building, called the Mermaid Hotel, with a large square sign on a tall post, in front, on which was painted a full-sized mermaid standing on her tail on the waves, holding a looking glass before her with one hand, and combing her long golden tresses with the other. The house was owned and conducted as an inn and stage stand by Capt. Lyman Adams, a retired New England sea captain, of kind and genial disposition, who ended his days there, highly respected and esteemed by all who knew him.

The interest of Mr. Dickens’ visit to Illinois culminates in his impressions and description of the prairie, the objective point of his “jaunt,” thus recounted in his *Notes*, “It would be difficult to say why or how—though it was possible from having heard and read so much about it—but the effect on me was disappointment. Looking towards the setting sun, there lay, stretched out before my view, a vast expanse of level ground, unbroken, save by one thin line of trees, which scarcely amounted to a scratch upon the great blank; until it met the glowing

sky, wherein it seemed to dip, mingling with its rich colors, and mellowing in its distant blue. There it lay, a tranquil sea or lake without water, if such a simile be admissible, with the day going down upon it; a few birds wheeling here and there, and solitude and silence reigning paramount around. But the grass was not yet high; there were bare, black patches on the ground; and the few wild flowers that the eye could see were poor and scanty. Great as the picture was, its very flatness and extent, which left nothing to the imagination, tamed it down and cramped its interest. I felt little of that sense of freedom and exhilaration which a Scotch heath inspired or even our English downs awaken. It was lonely and wild, but oppressive in its barren monotony. I felt that in traversing the prairies I could never abandon myself to the scene, forgetful of all else, as I should do instinctively were the heather underneath my feet, or an iron-bound coast beyond; but should often glance towards the distant and frequently receding line of the horizon, and wish it gained and passed. It is not a scene to be forgotten, but it is scarcely one, I think (at all events, as I saw it) to remember with much pleasure or to covet the looking on again in after life."

Immediately following this is his account of the sunset lunch that was eaten, which the great writer seems to have enjoyed much more and remembered better than his view of the prairie. "We encamped," he goes on to say, "near a solitary log house, for the sake of its water, and dined upon the plain. The baskets contained roast fowls, buffalo tongue (an exquisite dainty, by the way), ham, bread, cheese and butter, biscuits, champagne, sherry, lemons and sugar for punch, and abundance of rough ice. The meal was delicious and the entertainers were the soul of kindness and good humor. I have often recalled that cheerful party to my pleasant recollection since, and shall not easily forget, in junketing nearer home with friends of older date, my boon companions on the prairie."

There is a discrepancy in the prairie scene drawn by Mr. Dickens difficult to reconcile, excepting upon the grave suspicion that the "champagne, sherry, lemons and sugar for punch" must have operated as a disturbing element in his vision and memory. "Looking towards the setting sun," he says, "there lay stretched out before my view a vast expanse of level ground with the day going down upon it." Now, from Lebanon Mr. Dickens and party traveled almost directly east, a mile through the timber, and about a mile into the prairie to that "solitary cabin." They were then on the *western* border of the prairie. From that point, therefore, in looking over that "vast expanse of level ground," the setting sun was behind them. The time was sunset, and had Mr. Dickens been "looking towards the setting sun," as he says, he would have seen no "vast expanse of level ground," but instead only a half mile slope down to the rivulet and a corresponding half mile ascent on the other side up to the Silver creek timber surrounding Lebanon. In looking over the prairie his face was turned to the *east*, and the sun was sinking in the forest behind him. Nor is there any expanse of *level* land there, no prairie in Illinois having more perfect natural drainage than Looking Glass.

A few years later, when a student at McKendree College, I paid several visits to that "solitary cabin," made historic by Mr. Dickens' champagne dinner, and his first and only view of our prairies. The cabin long since disappeared, and its site, made memorable by the pen and presence of the author of *Pickwick* and *David Copperfield*, is lost in the mazes of endless corn fields.

Mr. Dickens perhaps wrote his candid impression of the prairie as it appeared to him; but his disparaging description of "a level plain," with the sun setting in the east, written many months later, warrants the belief that in that sketch he again relied altogether upon his capricious memory.

Looking Glass Prairie, in fact, at that time presented as charming a landscape as could be found in the prairie region of Illinois. It was merely one of the many prolongations, or offsets, of the grand treeless plain extending north and east beyond the limits of the State. Framed around, on the west and north, by the wooded hills of Silver Creek, and by the timbered line of Sugar Creek to the east and south, eight miles away, it presented to the eye, from the site of that "solitary log cabin," a magnificent panorama of undulating plain diversified with isolated groves and brush-fringed rivulets. Seen as Mr. Dickens saw it—and as I first saw it—in its virgin freshness, undefiled by the plow, or yet marred by the embellishments of civilization, it was one of nature's finest rural gems, fascinating in interest and wild sublimity.

After dining on the prairie, Mr. Dickens and party returned to Lebanon and passed the night at the Mermaid Hotel. The next morning he arose at 5:00 o'clock and, after a short walk about the village, returned to the tavern and amused himself for some time in the inspection of its public rooms and back yard, which seems to have afforded him more genuine enjoyment than his view of the prairie.

In his narrative of the "jaunt to Looking Glass Prairie and back," he only mentions the topography of the country he saw to misrepresent and vilify it, and is silent regarding its productions, resources and future possibilities. But he describes in detail an old whisky-soaked settler of the backwoods type, and devotes an entire page to his interview with the tramping Scotch doctor, and more space to a pen picture of the Lebanon tavern and its stable yard than to the prairie he came specially to see. He was much impressed by the sight of a tailor's shop on wheels, and brightly painted front doors, and the moving of a small frame house down the street from one locality to another, but makes no mention of those noted pioneer

institutions of learning, McKendree College, at Lebanon, and Rev. John M. Peck's Rock Spring Seminary, three miles west of Lebanon, both very conspicuous objects by the roadside along which he journeyed.

In full sight of the spot where the party dined on the plain, and less than a mile away, stands Emerald Mound, the most prominent landmark of the prairie, one of the finest and most perfect of all the earthen monuments of the aborigines in the State. This remarkable vestige of a vanished prehistoric people is well calculated to attract the attention and interest of any intelligent foreign (or native) tourist; but not a word did Mr. Dickens write about it. He could not well have failed to see it, and that he did see it is confirmed by his trivial notice of its more majestic contemporaneous structure, the great Cahokia mound, near which he passed when returning to St. Louis by the upper, or more direct, road.

Of that wonderful work he merely says, "Looming in the distance, as we rode along, was another of the ancient Indian burial places, called the Monks' Mound in memory of a body of fanatics of the order of La Trappe, who founded a desolate convent there many years ago, when there were no settlers within a thousand miles, and were all swept off by the pernicious climate—in which lamentable fatality few rational people will suppose, perhaps, that society experienced any very severe deprivation."

Mr. Dickens does not mention, in his *Notes*, the name of any one of the young men who took him over to Illinois to see the prairie; nor did he write one word expressive of gratitude for their generosity in leaving their business and providing lavishly, free of all expense to him, everything necessary to conduce to his pleasure and satisfaction in that excursion. It seems that a sense of ordinary courtesy would have prompted him to at least return some slight public acknowledgment of that obligation.

Cairo was the only other locality in Illinois visited by Mr. Dickens. To see Cairo was really the main object

of his journey to America. In 1837 one Darius B. Holbrook, a shrewd Boston Yankee, organized the Cairo City and Canal Company, a scheme as audaciously illusive as John Law's Mississippi Bubble of 1718; and going to Europe he plastered the walls everywhere there with flaming lithographs of a grand city at the junction of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers—in fact as mythical as the fabled Quivira of Coronado's search. In London was the banking house of John Wright & Co.—the same that, in 1839, confided the Illinois Fund Commissioners, Governor Reynolds, Senator Young, General Rawlings and Colonel Oakley, into depositing with them \$1,000,000 of Illinois bonds, resulting in a loss to the State of half their value. Through John Wright & Co., Holbrook actually sold bonds of his Cairo company to the amount of \$2,000,000. Among his numerous victims was Mr. Dickens, who, it is asserted, invested in those bonds a large part of his slender means.

A few years later, becoming, with other investors, suspicious of the flaunted magnificence of the American Cairo, Mr. Dickens concluded to satisfy himself by a personal inspection of it. He came, and thus described what he saw: "At length, upon the morning of the third day, we arrived at a spot so much more desolate than any we had yet beheld, that the forlornest places we had passed were, in comparison with it, full of interest. At the junction of the two rivers, on ground so flat and low and marshy that at certain seasons of the year it is inundated to the house-tops, lies a breeding place of fever, ague and death, vaunted in England as a mine of Golden Hope, and speculated in, on the faith of monstrous representations, to many people's ruin. A dismal swamp, on which the half-built houses rot away; cleared here and there for the space of a few yards, and teeming then with rank unwholesome vegetation, in whose baleful shade the wretched wanderers who are tempted hither, droop and die, and lay their bones; the hateful Mississippi circling

and eddying before it, and turning off upon its southern course a slimy monster hideous to behold; a hotbed of disease, an ugly sepulchre, a grave uncheered by any gleam of promise; a place without one single quality, in earth or air or water, to commend it; such is this dismal Cairo."

This crushing disappointment and shocking dissipation of his cherished dreams of golden profits accounts for Mr. Dickens' malignant defamation of everything he saw west of Louisville, and explains the venom in his satirical novel that soon followed, entitled "Martin Chuzzlewit," in which he wreaks his vengeance upon the United States generally, and upon Cairo particularly under the pseudonym of "Eden."